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The Entertainment-Education Communication Strategy: Past Struggles, Present Status, Future Agenda

The entertainment media have a high potential to educate the public on a variety of social topics: HIV/AIDS prevention, family planning, maternal and child health, gender equality, environmental conservation, literacy, and others. However, to date, the educational potential of the entertainment media has not been tapped systematically in either developed or developing countries (Katz, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Singhal & Rogers, 1989a; Brown & Cody, 1991; Nariman, 1993; Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993; Cooper-Chen, 1994; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994; Svenkerud, Rahoi, & Singhal, 1995). Development policy-makers, media practitioners, and media audiences should more seriously consider the educational potential of entertainment media for several compelling reasons:

1. Leisure and entertainment represent one of the most important megatrends of the 20th century. In the U.S., an adult, on average, spends 40 hours and \$30 a week on entertainment (Bernstein, 1990). Entertainment consumption continues to rise steadily in both developed and developing countries. Hence, the educational quality of the entertainment media needs to be considered more carefully.
2. Entertainment media options, spurred by advances in such new communication technologies as satellites,

computers, fiber optics, CD-ROMs, and cable TV are rapidly expanding worldwide. As the hardware of entertainment media expand, the choice of the software it carries becomes an important determinant of whether or not the media will be used responsibly in society.

3. Development problems loom large all over the world: Ethnic conflicts, environmental catastrophes, infectious diseases, hunger and famine, and unsupported population growth. Resources to tackle them are scarce, if not dwindling. The communication media represent one important tool to disseminate development messages. However, this tool needs to be harnessed judiciously and pragmatically. The popularity, pervasiveness, and profitability of the entertainment media make them especially suited to carry messages of education and development (Piotrow, 1990; Singhal & Brown, 1995).
4. The consumption of isensationali entertainment media programming is rising steeply all over the world. Often, to boost audience ratings, media producers degrade entertainment messages to include overt depictions of sex, violence, gratuitous drinking, smoking, and other anti-social behaviors (Lowry & Towles, 1989; Greenberg & Busselle, 1996). Audience research in many countries shows that viewers would actually prefer to consume more socially-responsible iwholesomei entertainment, if only it were more readily available (Straubhaar, 1984 and 1991; Singhal & Svenkerud, 1994).
5. Recent research evidence suggests that carefully-designed entertainment initiatives can reach large audiences, educate them about development topics, promote behavior change among them, and at the same time be commercially viable (Kincaid, Jara, Coleman, & Segura, 1988; Singhal & Rogers, 1989b; Wang & Singhal, 1992; Valente, Kim, Lettenmaier, Glass, & Dibba, 1994; Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994; Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Program, 1995).

Scholarly and policy interest in using the entertainment media for educational purposes is growing. In 1996, we estimate some 75 communication projects are underway in about 40 developing countries, which consciously combine entertainment and educational media appeals. This strategy, generally

referred to as the entertainment-education strategy, represents an innovative, persuasive media strategy to address problems of development and social change. Entertainment-education is defined as the process of putting educational content in entertainment media messages in order to increase knowledge about an issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior concerning the educational issue or topic (Singhal, in preparation). The general idea is to use the universal appeal of entertainment to show individuals how they can live safer, healthier, and happier lives.

The present article takes stock of the entertainment-education communication strategy. Using hindsight, coupled with the wisdom gained from past entertainment-education efforts, we explore the merits and problems of this presently in vogue social change communication strategy. We also project where the field of entertainment-education is heading, or should be heading, as interest in the use of the entertainment-education communication strategy continues to rise.

Entertainment: Worthless or Worthwhile?

For several decades, the entertainment media were subject to a highly condescending appraisal by the elite guardians of high culture, who believed that entertainment was mindless, worthless, and even sinful (Gans, 1975). In an important book, Mendelsohn (1966) defended the legitimacy of entertainment media, arguing that it provided recreation and escape from hard work. He identified the various reasons why popular entertainment media were perceived so negatively:

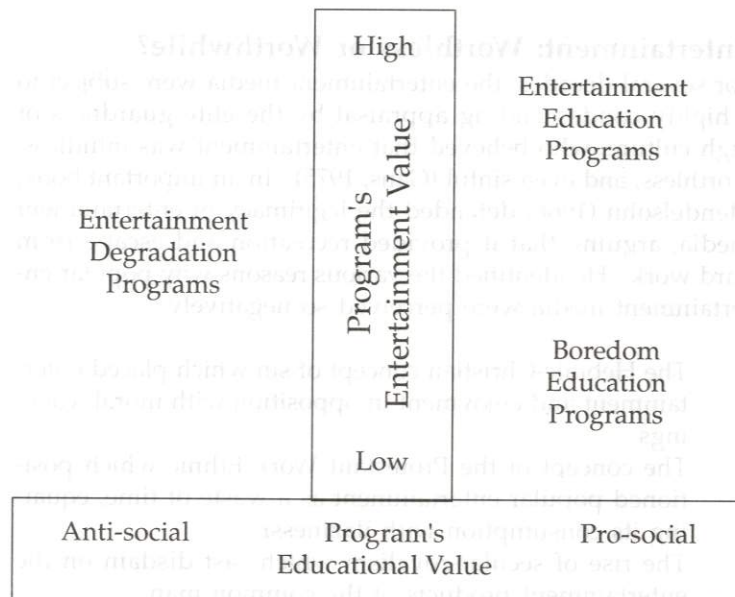
1. The Hebraic-Christian concept of sin which placed entertainment and enjoyment in opposition with moral teachings.
2. The concept of the Protestant Work Ethic which positioned popular entertainment as a waste of time, equating its consumption with laziness.
3. The rise of secular-royalism which cast disdain on the entertainment products of the common man.
4. The rise of reform movements and liberalism which attacked social institutions (including media) for corrupting the common man.
5. The rise of ideological Marxism which attacked entertainment as a source of false consciousness.

6. The rise of Freudian psychoanalytic movement which raised a fear of fantasy gratification.

Mendelsohn's (1966) book represented an important intellectual milestone in the historical evolution of the entertainment-education communication strategy. Also, important in the formulation of the entertainment-education strategy were two undesirable trends in mass media programming: The proliferation of (1) entertainment-degradation programs, and (2) boredom-education programs (Singhal, in preparation).

Entertainment-degradation programs represent a growing trend in modern popular culture of *idegrading* a message to increase its entertainment value in order to achieve a larger audience (Figure 1). Howard Stern's *ishock radio* in the U.S., perceived by many viewers as lewd and repulsive, is an example of this undesirable trend (Brown & Singhal, 1955). The increasing depiction of explicit sexual content and graphic

FIGURE 1
Many mass media programs fall in the category of entertainment-degradation programs and boredom-education programs. Entertainment-education programs represent a relatively underutilized genre in mass media programming.



violence in entertainment television and videos are also examples of this negative media trend.

Boredom-education programs represent a type of educa-

tional programming which, despite good intentions and heavy investment, are perceived as dull and didactic by audiences (media programs that promote agriculture, health, family planning, etc., in various developing countries, often fall in this category). The prosocial educational content is overtly emphasized to the point that the audience members are annoyed. Audience members also lose interest because of the slow-paced non-engaging presentation style of many educational programs.

Entertainment-education programs provide an opportunity to overcome the limitations of entertainment-degradation and boredom-education types of programs. They provide an opportunity to be socially responsible and commercially profitable; further, they can make education engaging and rewarding for audience members. The past two decades of entertainment-education experiences provide evidence that such programs provide an effective counter, as well as a more socially-desirable alternative, to entertainment-degradation and entertainment-boredom programs (Wang & Singhal, 1992; Ball-Rokeach & Others, 1984; Church & Geller, 1989).

Entertainment-Education: Past & Present

One should acknowledge that the general idea of combining entertainment and education to produce social change is not new: It goes as far back in human history as the timeless art of storytelling. In countries where a rich oral tradition still persists, folktales with moral messages are an integral part of people's non-formal education. Folk theater, dance drama, fables, morality plays, religious music, and other art forms display many elements of the entertainment-education strategy (Valbuena, 1987; 1988).

However, the idea of purposively combining entertainment with education in the modern mass media channels — radio, television, film, video, rock music, and others — is a relatively new concept (Singhal & Rogers, 1989c). The entertainment-education strategy in radio was institutionalized in 1951 with the broadcast of the popular British radio soap opera, *The Archers*. This program continues to be broadcast in Britain in 1996, making it the longest running entertainment-education radio program of all time. *The Archers* was purposely designed to promote farming innovation in Britain,

given its agricultural economy was ravaged after World War II (Food and Agriculture Organization, 1987). Since the late 1950s, a highly skilled radio scriptwriter in Jamaica, Elaine Perkins, has produced several series of radio soap operas, each designed to promote an educational-development issue (Cambridge, 1992; Hazzard & Cambridge, 1988). In more recent years, Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services, Center for Communication Programs, Baltimore and Population Communications-International, a non-profit organization headquartered in New York, have helped launch entertainment-education radio soap operas in several developing countries, with generally positive educational outcomes (Valente et. al., 1994; Lettenmaier et. al., 1993; Rogers, Vaughan, & Shefner-Rogers, 1995; Rogers et. al., 1996).

The conscious use of the entertainment-education strategy in television and rock music are relatively more recent, and owe their inspiration to the work of a creative writer-producer-director of television in Mexico, Miguel Sabido (Figure 2). Sabido, in turn was inspired by the educational effects of a 1969 Peruvian soap opera, "Simplemente Maria". In this soap opera, which was popular throughout Latin America, the value of hard work was emphasized through the main character of Maria. She came from the Andean highlands, worked in the city as a maid, enrolled in the evening in adult literacy classes, and eventually made a successful career as a seamstress and fashion designer (Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994). Where ever "Simplemente Maria" was broadcast in Latin America, young women, inspired by Maria, began to enroll in adult literacy classes and in sewing schools. Sabido watched these unintentional educational effects of "Simplemente Maria" in Mexico with awe, convinced that commercial soap operas could be used for alleviating social problems. Over several years, in the early 1970s, Sabido formulated the theoretic basis of the entertainment-education strategy in television, proposing a method of producing entertainment-education soap operas or telenovelas (television novels) (Nariman, 1993; Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993; Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994).

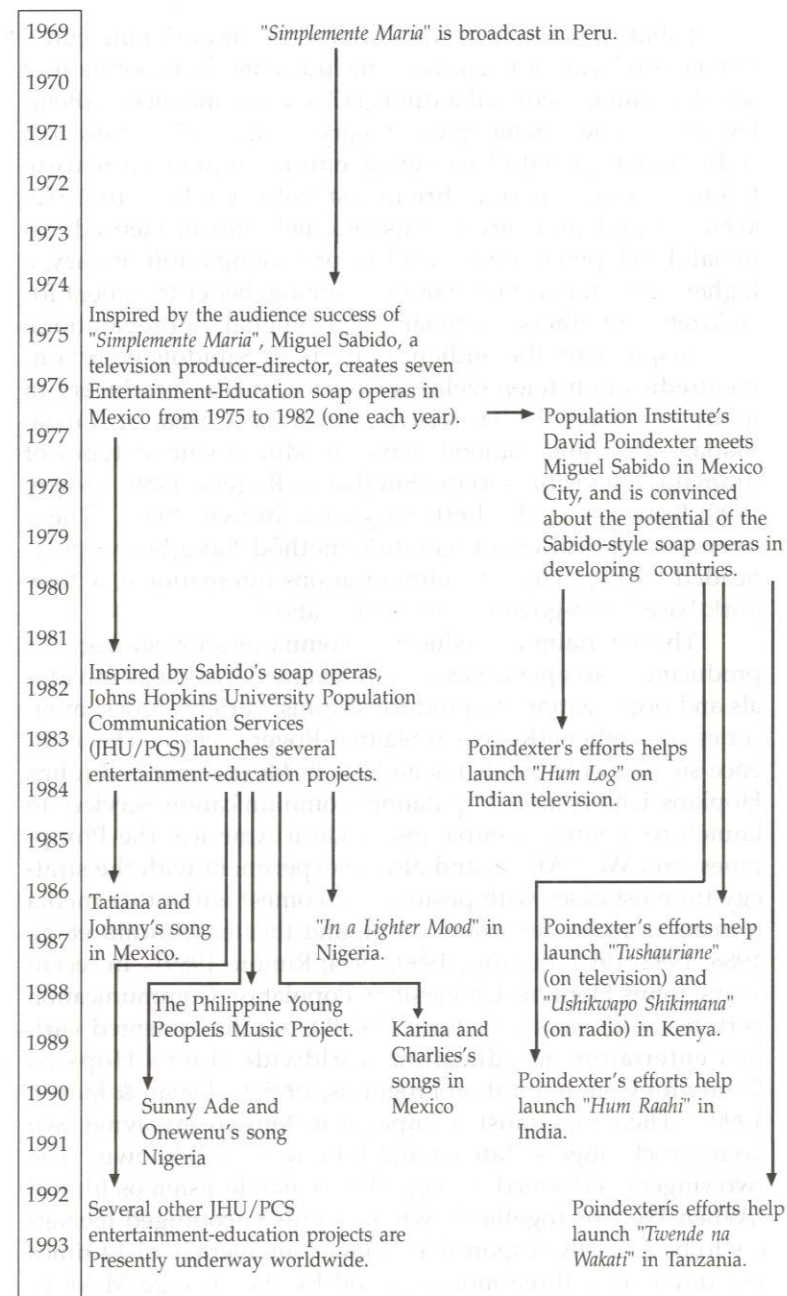


FIGURE 2
Some recent
entertainment-
education
projects
worldwide and
how each was
influenced by
its predecessors.

Sabido's message design framework for designing entertainment-education telenovelas included the incorporation of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977); dramatic theory (Bentley, 1967); and archetypal theory (Jung, 1970). Research indicated that Sabido's seven entertainment-education telenovelas in Mexico, broadcast between 1975 to 1982, achieved high audience ratings and met most of their educational-development objectives like promoting adult literacy, a higher status for women, family planning, better treatment for children, and others (Nariman, 1993; Singhal, in preparation).

Inspired by the audience effects of Sabido's entertainment-education telenovelas in Mexico, media producers in many countries (India, Kenya, Tanzania, China, St. Lucia, Madagascar, and others) have produced similar types of dramatic television serials (Singhal & Rogers, 1989; Brown, 1990; Brown & Cody, 1991; Singhal & Brown, 1995). These overseas replication of Sabido's method have been spearheaded by Population Communications-International, a New York based non-government organization.

The entertainment-education communication strategy for producing soap operas has been reinvented by other individuals and organizations to produce sitcoms, variety shows, mini-series, and others (Rogers & Shefner-Rogers, 1994). The audience success of Sabido's telenovelas in Mexico inspired Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services to launch rock music campaigns in Latin America, the Philippines, and West Africa, and also to experiment with the strategy (in most cases with positive out-comes) with other media formats in radio, television, print, and theater (Kincaid et. al. 1988; 1992; 1993; Piotrow, 1990; 1994; Rimon, 1989). In recent years, Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services, with assistance from USAID, has implemented various entertainment-education worldwide (Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, 1995; Coleman & Meyer, 1990). Their rock music campaign in Mexico involving two young rock singers, Tatiana and Johnny, is well known. The two singers performed a song called *¿Cuándo Estemos Juntos?* (*When We Are Together?*), whose words encouraged teenagers to be sexually responsible. Played an average of 14 times per day over a three month period by the average Mexican

radio station, the song raises consciousness among Mexican young people about the issue, leading to more responsible sexual behaviors among teenagers (Kincaid, Jara, Coleman, & Segura, 1988).

Past research on the entertainment-education communication strategy has yielded generally positive outcomes, reinforcing the idea that entertainment and education, including commercial and social interests, can be judiciously combined to bring about social change. However, there is an accompanying realization that such programs need higher start-up costs, more investments in formative research, and skilled production personnel who can create an appropriate entertainment-education mix. There is no fixed formula for how much entertainment and how much education to mix, so creativity in message design becomes a critical factor. Translating the theoretical constructs of message design into practical plots is problematic, unless the scriptwriting team is highly skilled (Mendelsohn, 1971). Once an entertainment-education program is launched, assuring a quality production is not always a guarantee. The danger of vested interests taking over are always present as producers, actors, commercial sponsors, and development officials vie for recognition.

Several ethical problems also underlie the entertainment-education communication strategy? The key ethical question is: Who is to determine what is right for whom (Brown & Singhal, 1990; Brown & Singhal, 1994)? What constitutes prosocial for the message production team might not be considered so by the audiences. Also, audience members process messages selectively, and might read multiple interpretations of the intended educational message (Ram, 1993; Malwade-Rangarajan, 1992). Also, some members of the audience may benefit more than others? These problems are not entirely insurmountable, nor can they be completely overcome. These ethical problems are common to all forms of persuasive communication, thus all forms of persuasive communication must wrestle with these dilemmas. These must be discussed and debated both by the message producers of entertainment-education as well as the intended receivers.

Entertainment-Education: Future Agenda

Interest in the entertainment-education communication strat-

egy is clearly on the rise. The 1994 United Nations Population Conference in Cairo recognized it as a viable communication strategy for population communication, and in recent years, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta has considered the adoption of this strategy to target adolescents at high risk for drug abuse and HIV/AIDS (Rogers & Shefner-Rogers, 1994). A core body of knowledge, experience, and expertise now exists on the entertainment-education strategy, which will be shared widely during the Second International Conference on Entertainment and Social Change, scheduled in May 1997 in Athens, Ohio, USA.

However, for most policy-makers in most developed countries, the entertainment-education communication strategy is still an enigma. Many still may not know about it, or if they do, are still not convinced that it can work. Unfortunately most of the research conducted to date on the entertainment-education communication strategy, barring a few exceptions, has had methodological drawbacks which make claims of media-induced behavioral change somewhat suspect. This problem may be overcome as more rigorous research designs are put in place (e.g. Rogers, et. al, 1996) to evaluate the audience effects of entertainment-education programs.

The entertainment-education strategy is likely to chart new territories in the future, despite some of its limitations. Overall, this strategy has shown promise. Here we outline the new directions where the field of entertainment-education might be headed, or should be headed:

1. Moving from a "production-centered" approach to a more "audience-centered" approach in designing entertainment-education programs. Entertainment-education programs have often come under criticism for their seemingly one-way, non-participatory quality. They have also been criticized for allowing commercial (production-centered) interests to override social (audience-centered) interests. Creators and implementors of entertainment-education programs must attend to such issues more carefully.

Formative research can help bridge the gap between producer and audience goals. However, by itself formative research is not enough. Producers of entertainment-education programs should try to more actively

involve the target audiences in the actual production of media messages.

Such a participatory form of entertainment-education message development occurred in the Kheda Communication Project (KCP) in Gujarat, India, where target audiences (villagers of Kheda District) regularly participated in designing and acting in entertainment-education television serials (Mody, 1991). Several KCP's television serials, including 'Chatur Mota' ('Wise Elder') and 'Nari Tu Narayani' ('Women You Are Powerful') can be considered as exemplars of participatory forms of entertainment-education programming. In the U.S., the Office of Latino Affairs in Washington D.C. also utilizes such participatory form of message design approach in their entertainment-education television series, *Linea Directa*, which is broadcast on Spanish language channels in the U.S.

2. Incorporation of more cultural, humanistic, and literary traditions in both designing and researching entertainment-education programs. To date most entertainment-education programs have been designed and/or researched utilizing primarily social scientific theories (social learning theory, diffusion of innovations theory, para-social interaction theory, etc.) and methods (survey research methods, audience ratings, etc.). While useful, these social-scientific theories and methods have their limitations (Rogers & Shefner-Rogers, 1994).

In recent years, several additional insights about the nature of entertainment-education programs have been gleaned by designing and researching them from the theoretical viewpoints from the cultural, humanistic, and literary traditions (Lozano, 1992; Lozano & Singhal, 1993; Malwade-Rangarajan, 1992; Ram, 1993; Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994; Svenkerud, Rahoi, & Singhal, 1995; Storey, 1995; Storey, in press). In the future, we are more likely to see a further integration of cross-disciplinary theoretical view-points in designing and researching entertainment-education programs.

3. Drawing more on the knowledge vested in such area studies as attitude change and persuasion, social marketing, and cognitive information processing in implementing entertainment-education projects. To date, entertain-

ment-education efforts have drawn heavily on the model of producing pro-social soap operas, pioneered by Miguel Sabido in Mexico in the 1970s, emphasizing such theoretical constructs as social modeling, archetypes, melodrama, and others (Nariman, 1993). These multidisciplinary theoretical constructs, drawing upon such fields as social psychology, literary tradition, and drama, have proved to be useful tools for entertainment-education message designers. However, the vast literature of such well-researched disciplines as attitudes change and persuasion, social marketing, and cognitive processing of information, has not been so systematically integrated in the design of entertainment-education efforts. Entertainment-education efforts in the future should more systematically draw upon this vast reservoir of accumulated knowledge, which is easily accessible.

4. Incorporation of more rigorous research designs to evaluate the educational effects of entertainment-education programs. A field experiment design with pre-post and experimental/control data is best able to isolate audience effects as a result of exposure to entertainment-education messages. Few field experiments have been conducted to date because of the practical and ethical difficulties in having a control group that is not exposed to the entertainment-education messages (Rogers & Shefner-Rogers, 1994).

A field experiment with a multi-method data-collection strategy is presently underway to evaluate the effects of *'Twende na Wakati'* ('Let's Go With the Times'), a radio soap opera in Tanzania promoting family planning and HIV/AIDS prevention messages (Rogers, Vaughan, & Shefner-Rogers, 1995). Another field experiment research design is in place to evaluate the effects of *'Zhongou Baixing'* ('Ordinary People'), a Chinese television soap opera presently in production (in 1995), which will promote the status of women, family planning, and HIV/AIDS prevention (Singhal, Rogers, Vaughan, & others, 1995).

Research evidence generated from such rigorous research designs (as field experiments) are more likely to convince policy-makers about the extent to which the entertainment-education strategy is able to meet its edu-

- cational goals.
5. *Integration of traditional and modern media channels of entertainment to more widely disseminate educational messages.* Local folk theater, dance forms, puppetry, storytelling and other traditional forms of communication have an important role to play in entertainment-education projects. Any comprehensive entertainment-education strategy must aggressively harness such pre-existing local, traditional media forms. Further, ways must be found to adapt local folk channels of recreation and education for wider dissemination on the more ubiquitous modern media channels. Such a strategy was employed in Mali when a traditional theatrical art form, Koteba, was developed to address family planning issues. This Koteba was then videotaped and broadcast on national network television, realizing strong effects (Schubert, 1988).
 6. *Moving from a primary focus on family planning and public health issues to creating entertainment-education programs to address other development needs.* Most of the past entertainment-education programming efforts have focused on family planning, its proximate determinants like status of women and maternal and child health, and public health topics like HIV/AIDS prevention, oral rehydration therapy, and others. This emphasis on family size and related public health issues is understandable given the two institutional leaders in implementing entertainment-education efforts worldwide — Johns Hopkins University's Population Communication Services and Population Communications-International of New York — especially emphasize population and public health issues. In the future, the scope of the entertainment-education strategy is likely to enlarge to include other development topics such as environmental conservation, human rights, racial tolerance, and others, as more organizations embrace the entertainment-education approach (Singhal & Rogers, 1994).
 7. *The entertainment-education strategy is likely to go beyond its uses in mass communication to infect other areas such as classroom instruction, distance learning, and others.* In recent years, a growing trend in instructional settings is for

teachers to supplement straight lectures with audio-visual aids, classroom activities, and participatory games to enhance student involvement and learning. Such entertainment-education approaches to formal instructional practices are likely to grow in the future, especially with the arrival of multi-media technology in classrooms.

8. *Demand for entertainment-education programming is likely to increase as arbitrary distinctions between the traditional entertainment, education, and information technologies further blur.* This technology-led trend is evidenced by the increased availability of educational instruction through interactive multi-media, the information super highway, and other such channels.

Conclusions

The entertainment-education communication strategy has come some way in the past couple of decades. There is a growing realization among policy-makers and practitioners that the entertainment media represent a potentially powerful tool for influencing peoples' attitudes and behaviors. So why not harness this tool for social good?

During the remainder of this decade and then in the 21st century, developed and developing countries will be spending billions of dollars to sponsor, design, and implement communication campaigns. By applying the important lessons learned from past entertainment-education communication strategies, policy planners can more effectively use their influence and resources for development. The entertainment-education communication strategy is one method that should be given more consideration in advancing development and prosocial goals. It is one of the few communication approaches that can be socially responsible yet commercially viable.

Endnotes

This paper draws upon the authors previous works: Singhal, Rogers, and Brown (1993); Brown & Singhal (1994); and Brown & Singhal (1995).

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